
Fate of Tamil chief at center as Sri Lanka seeks victory

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By Seth Mydans COLOMBO: Will he kill himself? This is a tactical military question now as the Sri Lankan Army closes in on Velupillai Prabhakaran and the stubborn core of his Tamil separatist insurgency. There is always the possibility that Prabhakaran, 54, is already dead or that he has fled the military offensive, and those questions, too, are critical as the army seeks a final victory and plans ahead for the aftermath of his 25-year rebellion.

Prabhakaran is the founder and driving force of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist movement that is known for its resourcefulness, for its brutality and for its suicides. A pioneer in the tactic of suicide bombings, Prabhakaran created a squad called the Black Tigers — up to 40 percent of them women — that has carried out scores of attacks over the years, both targeted assassinations and mass terror killings. Many of his regular fighters have taken their own lives as well rather than surrender, biting into cyanide tablets that they often carry on a string like a small memento mori around the neck. Today in Asia & Pacific U.S. plan would more than double Afghan forces Officials link Kabul attackers to Pakistan China uses vouchers to spur consumer spending This dedication is part of a cultlike devotion to Prabhakaran — a chubby man with a ragged mustache whose charisma is not always evident to outsiders — and nobody knows what will come of his mission once he is gone. Will his soldiers continue to fight with the same savage determination, and will the insurgency regroup and revert to hit-and-run terrorism once its main force is destroyed? Without Prabhakaran, some analysts say, his rebellion may collapse. Or perhaps he might be seen as a martyr and rallying cry for further insurgency. Just as Prabhakaran's fate dominates questions about the end game of the war, his remorselessness and ruthlessness have made him the single dominant figure in Sri Lanka's history for the past quarter-century. His insurgency has held the country hostage to terrorism. It has held back social and economic development, heightened violent ethnic divisions and pushed the government toward a more hunkered, repressive posture. There have been cease-fires and negotiations over the years; all have failed because Prabhakaran would not give up the war. Presidents have come and gone, their policies dominated by harder or softer lines toward his insurgency. Prabhakaran has mostly remained constant, a man who is ready "to take any method, however repulsive, as long as it furthered his struggle," according to a leading biography, "Inside an Elusive Mind: Prabhakaran" by M.R. Narayan Swamy. Though the Tigers rarely claim responsibility for their work, his suicide bombers are suspected in the deaths of two national leaders — former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India in 1991 and President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka in 1993. "Our methods of warfare are unacceptable to various people," said S. Subramaniam, a longtime associate of Prabhakaran's who is quoted in Swamy's 2003 book. "But Prabhakaran as well as our movement have survived precisely because of them." A high school dropout from a middle-class family, Prabhakaran ignited the insurgency by his own hand with the assassination of a governor of Jaffna in 1975, walking up to him at a Hindu temple and shooting him point-blank. Jaffna, where Prabhakaran was born, is the center of what separatists call Eelam, a region in which the Tigers want to create a separate state for the mostly Hindu Tamils, who make up 12 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 21 million. Since independence from Britain in 1948, Buddhist Sinhalese, who form a majority, have pushed Tamils into the margins, declaring Sinhala the national language and Buddhism the principal religion and securing privileges for Sinhalese in education and government jobs. Fascinated by guns, meticulous in military planning, more ruthless than his rivals, Prabhakaran built a fanatical armed movement while reaching out to a wealthy Tamil diaspora to finance his well-armed insurgency. He is a master of escape and concealment and has seldom given interviews, emerging each year in November to give an annual address. "No sane voice is being raised," he said last November in an address carried on Tamil Web sites, "either to abandon war or to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict." His reserved demeanor has often puzzled outsiders, who have found him neat, polished and soft-spoken to the point of seeming shyness. "The quietest man I have come across," said Sadanand Menon, a veteran Indian journalist who met him in the early 1980s. "He was so soft-spoken that you could not hear him under his breath. It made you wonder, even if momentarily, if he really led the Tamil Tigers." Or Anita Pratap, another prominent Indian journalist who met him about the same time: "My first impression was that of utter disappointment. He looked stunningly ordinary. Dressed in a light-blue shirt and gray trousers, he could have easily been mistaken for a petty Tamil businessman." Since last August, the military has driven the Tigers out of their strongholds in the north and cornered them by the northeastern shore, on a spit of land just 12 kilometers, or 7 miles, long and 2 kilometers wide. Trapped with them are tens of thousands of Tamil civilians who have fled the fighting elsewhere. The Tigers have been accused of kidnapping them en masse, shooting some who try to leave and dragooning many others, including children, to take up arms and join them. The Sri Lankan military appears determined to end the war here and now, and the separatist fighters show no sign of backing down. If the army does make a final push and hundreds or thousands of civilians are killed, it could amount to the Tamil Tigers' most deadly mass suicide of the war. Aid worker dies after shelling An international aid group said one of its local workers was killed in a "no-fire" zone in Sri Lanka, The Associated Press reported in Colombo. The group, CARE International, which provides food and other aid to tens of thousands of people trapped by the fighting, said Wednesday that its worker died after a shell severed his leg. CARE said he was one of dozens of aid workers trapped in the conflict zone after the withdrawal of international agencies in September. He was hit by a shell on Tuesday and later died because there was no medical care. Courtesy: iht.com